

This is the first in a new series of short essays to be published regularly in Cultural Studies. In providing this space for responses to previously published essays and/or comments on recent developments in cultural studies, we invite authors and readers to engage in ongoing conversation about issues of general interest.

Submissions to 'Commentary' may be 2–10 manuscript pages and should be made directly to the editors, following standard submission procedures.

**A brief response to Stuart Hall's comments on my essay
'Cultural studies and ethnic absolutism'
Saba Mahmood.**

It is unfortunate that Stuart Hall chose to read my response to his essay as a wilful and persistent misreading of his arguments, intended to saddle him with the views of modernization theorists with whom he disagrees significantly. Far from making Hall a 'substitute target' for my arguments with modernization theorists, my intent was to problematize how the most progressive and well-intentioned arguments can evoke paradigms that, once made explicit, would be unacceptable to those of us who are committed to challenging Euro-Enlightenment oriented policies. In fact it is precisely *because* I respect Hall's sensitivity to such issues, that I tried to sketch the genealogy of, and inherent assumptions in, particular analyses of nationalism since the 1960s, taking care to point out where Hall's argument seems to concur and depart from this genealogy. Hall's contextualization of his views on nationalism through a discussion of the conflict between Wales and England is helpful in locating the historical and geographical compass of his theorizing. My disagreement is more with attempts at explicating the rest of the nationalist movements in the world through a theoretical skeleton derived from a historical context that is too often located in the West. While I understand the need to do away with the binarism of the 'First and Third world', I feel that the equation of a specific Western history (which claims to be universal) with the phenomenon of modernity that indeed *has* become globalized remains poorly theorized in most discussions on modernity in the non-Western world. In short, what difference, if any, does the consideration of specific cultural and social history make to theorizations of modernity? Unfortunately Hall does not engage this question.

A second point I would like to clarify is that my opposition to the use of the term 'fundamentalism' to explain a variety of disparate movements (in-

cluding white supremacists in Western Europe, religio-political movements of the Islamic world, and nationalist movements in Eastern Europe) does not in any way imply that I am uncritical of political developments in countries like Iran, Sudan or Algeria. On the contrary, as Hall acknowledges, my brief reference to the situation in Pakistan shows quite the opposite. Even if we ignore the historical baggage that this carries from its inception in twentieth-century Protestant Christian battles, I would like to ask, what is entailed in the insistence on calling particular movements fundamentalist? What do we gain analytically by such a process of naming? If it is to identify, categorize and challenge certain conservative political tendencies, then would it not be more helpful to do this on specific grounds? Political categorizations are not innocent of the meanings they carry, and I remain sceptical of the reductionism entailed in terms such as fundamentalism – especially at a time when the complexity of political movements is bleeding through categories even as basic as ‘the right and the left’ Finally, I will reiterate what I hoped was quite clear in my earlier essay. My writing does not suggest a distortion of, or disrespect for, Hall’s work, but is motivated by the desire to challenge the adequacy of our inherited analytical tools in understanding political challenges that we currently face in the world.

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